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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PBTS PINR PINS PNAT PREL GG RS
SUBJECT: IS THE KREMLIN REALLY LOSING THE INFORMATION WAR?
ONLY IN THE WEST

REF: A) MOSCOW 2343 B) MOSCOW 2366 C) MOSCOW 2383

Classified By: A/DCM Alice G. Wells for reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Russian media seems as concerned about Western press coverage of the events in South Ossetia as it is by the conflict itself. Pro-Kremlin pundits and Russian officials alike have lashed out at CNN and other media sources, criticizing their bias, but other Russian voices have noted that the Kremlin has invested little energy in conveying the Russian point of view to a Western audience, in contrast to the media savvy Saakashvili. Privately, ordinarily pro-Western contacts have complained to us about the anti-Russian bias and observed that Western media has "failed" to understand Russia or try to see the conflict from Moscow's point of view. Russian journalists have enjoyed broad access to the military in South Ossetia, and appear to share the GOR conviction that Russia should not be held responsible for the war. We see little chance in the short term that Russian newsmakers or Western media will see eye-to-eye on how to cover the events. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Early in the conflict, state-controlled broadcast media devoted significant parts of the broadcasts criticizing the Western media for ignoring the plight of the South Ossetians and taking Georgia's side. In an evening news broadcast, state-run Rossiya network labeled some August 11 CNN footage of Saakashvili in Gori and example of "American TV's warfare against Russia. Channel One noted in an August 10 news programs that "(Saakashvili's) statements and footage of what is described as Russia's bombing of Gori is what Western coverage is limited to. The goal is that no one in the West should have any doubts about who attacked whom in this conflict."

¶3. (SBU) Russian officials have taken potshots at the Western media as well. In an August 12 press release, President Medvedev criticized the Western mass media for ignoring Georgia's "barbaric aggression against the South Ossetian civilians and peacekeepers." Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin said in an August 10 press conference, "We would like Western television to broadcast not only pictures of Russian tanks... but also show the suffering of the Ossetian people, dead elderly people and children, villages razed to the ground and Tskhinvali lying almost in ruins. This would be objective reporting. the rest are politically motivated versions." An August 13 statement by MFA spokesperson Alexander Nesterenko specifically called Western press reports of Russian troop movements in Georgia "baseless."

English versus Russian

¶4. (SBU) Part of the disconnect may be due to language. While Saakashvili has made himself available to Western reporters and given continual live interviews and speeches in English, the Russian government has held all press

conferences in Russian, almost all press conferences in Russian, except for Foreign Minister Lavrov's one session with the BBC, in English, on August 9. Only on August 13, when Western television channels showed Russian tanks headed to Tbilisi, did Prime Minister Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov call into CNN to deny that Russian troops intended to push deeper into Russia. Ministry of Defense press conferences are all in Russian as well.

¶ 15. (SBU) Independent, business oriented daily newspaper *Vedemosti* editorialized August 13: "Russian authorities may deem it unnecessary to explain their policies to foreign audiences. However, when Russia was bidding to host the Olympics...President Putin spoke in English and French... This time, Georgian leaders look like the good guys to the rest of the world. By watching international TV, one can hardly stop short of feeling sorry for Saakashvili, who speaks English and answers tough questions. An aggressive image costs Russia an outflow of foreign capital, falling stocks and an economic slowdown. A professional spokesman would be much cheaper."

¶ 16. (C) Aleksandr Golts, Deputy Editor of the Weekly Journal, said he believed Russia was "losing the propaganda war." Noting that only one of FM Lavrov's press conferences had been directed at the Western media, he contended that it was not entirely surprising that the West was reacting as strongly as it was.

¶ 17. (C) Public Chamber member and Russia/Georgia expert Nikolai Svanidze, lamented the fact that media coverage of the conflict in Russia - and in the U.S. and Europe - had not been objective. He argued that Western media had failed to

educate their audiences about the history of the conflict, and had been relying almost exclusively on Georgian sources. He suggested that a concerted effort by the Public Chamber to make available to Western media information from Russian sources, announced August 13, would go nowhere. As a member of the Public Chamber himself, he said he had conferred broadly with fellow members and, despite the Chamber leadership's assessment of Western coverage bias, had come to the conclusion that there was no chance to change perceptions via electronic media in the West.

¶ 18. (C) As for Russia, while Svanidze doubted that there had been much consideration given to how to package and distribute information on the conflict prior to its start, Russian leaders, especially Putin, had only themselves to blame now for the missed opportunity to get across their assessment of events through western media. The restrictions placed on media over the past several years were indicative of the attitude of Russian leaders toward the press. Putin simply did not think in terms of using effective media management to ensure that Russia's image abroad was taken into consideration.

Why Bother Trying? You Cannot Even Find This On a Map

¶ 19. (C) Several long-time media contacts acknowledged Russia's worsening international image, but put the blame on the Western media's inherent bias. Aleksey Anishyuk, Foreign Editor for mass-circulation tabloid *Moskovskiy Komsolmolets* told us that "nothing will make the Western press take a pro-Russian slant" because "Western media has to speak with one language to audiences that are primarily disposed against Russia." He suggested that Russian TV may have exaggerated the anti-Russian spin in the West in order to prepare the Russian public for a prolonged tension over Georgia and other ex-Soviet republics. He observed that the Western public's ignorance about the conflict ("Did Americans mistake this for the state of Georgia?" he asked sarcastically) fed into the Western media's tendency to oversimplify.

¶ 110. (C) Dmitry Babich, Editor-in-Chief of *Russia Profile* magazine echoed Anishyuk, noting that Russia stood no chance of winning the media war because the Western media benefits

from reinforcing public stereotypes rather than challenging them. He told us that Western journalists would never risk "boring their audiences" with a lengthy analysis of the complicated historical relationships between the Georgians and the South Ossetians. Babich noted that Western media rarely attended the frequent press briefings at the MFA or MOD, and he was even asked at one briefing, as a fluent English speaker, to pose as a foreign journalist when the moderator invited questions from the international media.

¶11. (C) Mikhail Ponomarev, News Director of TV Center (and former news director at state-run Vesti on Rossiya channel), also believed that Western coverage reflected the lack of interest and knowledge of the region. Meanwhile, the Russian media community is "genuinely confused and irritated" by the way the Western media presents the conflict, which in turn makes it difficult to present a balanced narrative of events.

Speaking to the Home Audiences

¶12. (C) Babich noted that while Russia may be losing the international media war, it had won the fight domestically. Traditionally anti-Kremlin Russian media and human rights advocates had voiced little criticism of Russian actions in Georgia. Ponomarev noted that this may be the first time that the Russian media, particularly television, encountered so few reporting restrictions or editorial pressures. He called the Russian military in the conflict zone "uncommonly friendly" to journalists. He also noted that a TV Center crew in Tskhinvali the day Georgia opened fire witness the heavy shelling as well as Georgian military atrocities against civilians. Most Russian journalists in the city that day suffered different degrees of blast injuries from the intense shelling. Ponomarev said that "nothing could convince him" that Russia should be held responsible for starting this conflict.

Comment

¶13. (C) Russians may complain about the anti-Russian bias in the Western media, but there seems to be little more than a perfunctory effort on the part of the Kremlin to bridge that divide. When ordinarily pro-Western contacts like Golts,

Ponomarev and Babich are unanimous in writing off the Western media and audiences as uninformed, biased and anti-Russia, it seems unlikely that the Kremlin will do more to win international opinion. They may not be getting the amount of international air time that Saakashvili is, but the domestic audiences seem more important -- and much more receptive.